

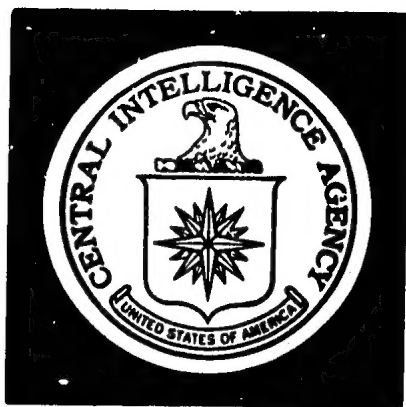
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**DIRECTORATE OF  
INTELLIGENCE**

# Intelligence Memorandum

***South Vietnam: Impact of Intensified Combat  
on VC/NVA Maneuver Battalion Strengths***

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**August 1969**

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
Directorate of Intelligence  
August 1969

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

South Vietnam:  
Impact of Intensified Combat  
on VC/NVA Maneuver Battalion Strengths

Introduction

Available information indicates that the intensification of combat in South Vietnam since 1967 has begun to seriously affect the strength of the enemy's major combat units -- the maneuver battalions.\* The average strength of the maneuver battalion has been declining since mid-1968 and appears to have dropped even more sharply during the early months of 1969.\*\* Although the indicators are still tenuous, there is reason to believe that the shrinking size of these battalions may be causing the enemy to change their tactical employment in order to use them more effectively under present conditions.

\* Maneuver battalions are the primary combat units engaged in conventional, as opposed to guerrilla, warfare. They include both Main and Local Forces and represent about 60 percent of the total conventional forces, the other principal elements being combat support units such as artillery and air defense and the Administrative Services units such as logistical and medical.

\*\* For an explanation of the methodology employed in this memorandum, see Appendix A.

Note: This memorandum was produced solely by CIA. It was prepared by the Office of Economic Research and was coordinated with the Office of National Estimates, the Office of Current Intelligence, and the Director's Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs.

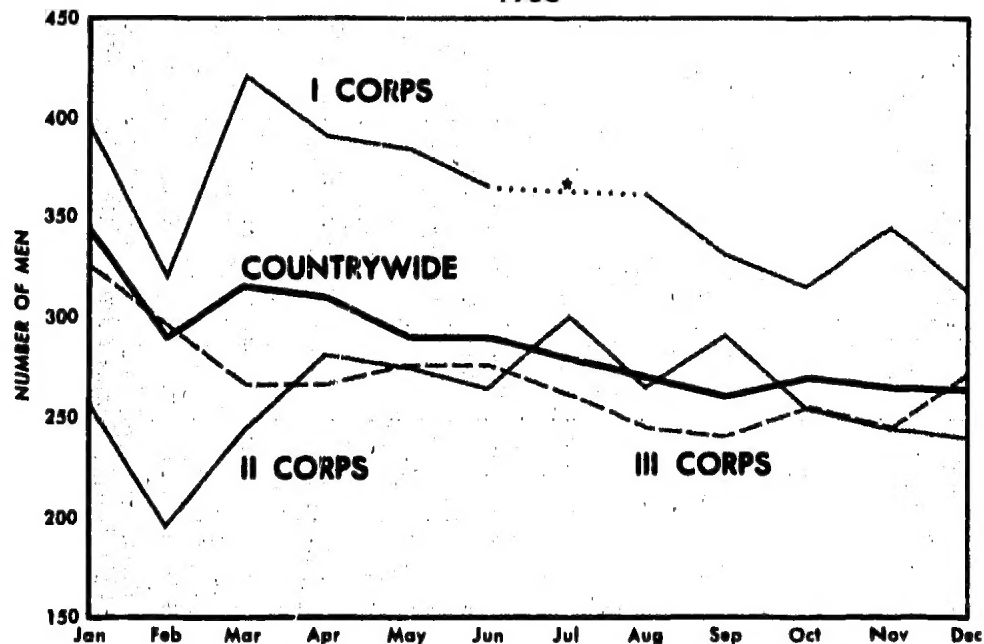
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**SECRET**Impact of the 1968 Offensive

1. The enemy's strength levels during 1968 were closely correlated with his military activities -- that is, strength levels fluctuated with the varying intensity of the enemy's offensives. The average assigned battalion strength declined from a high of 345 men in January 1968 to 290 in February during the period of the enemy's Tet offensive (see the chart and Table 1). There was a rise

**VC/NVA Main and Local Forces:  
Average Maneuver Battalion Strength  
1968**



\*No observations available

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to 310 during the next two months as the enemy replaced a large part of his Tet losses and prepared for the May-June offensive. After April, however, strength levels declined continuously, falling to an average of 260 in September. The downward trend during this period resulted from the frequent high

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Table 1

VC/NVA Main and Local Forces:  
Average Maneuver Battalion Strength a/  
1968

	<u>Countrywide Averages b/</u>	<u>Number of Observations</u>	<u>I Corps</u>	<u>II Corps</u>	<u>III Corps</u>
January	345	51	395	255	325
February	290	27	320	195	295
March	315	55	420	245	265
April	310	38	390	280	265
May	290	49	385	275	275
June	290	35	365	265	275
July	280	28	-	300	260
August	270	27	360	265	245
September	260	28	330	290	240
October	270	20	315	255	255
November	265	23	345	245	245
December	265	18	315	240	270
1968 average	295	399 <u>c/</u>	380	265	270
Fourth quarter 1967	375	73	460	325	370
Fourth quarter 1968	265	61	335	245	260

a. Rounded to the nearest five.

b. IV Corps is not included because of the paucity of information. However, the few samples available for IV Corps indicate a trend similar to the countrywide trend. Average strength during the last few months of 1967 totaled about 425 men. During 1968 (based on 17 samples) it dropped to an average of 325.

c. The actual number of observations for 1968 was larger than 399. In cases where a battalion had more than one reference for a specific month, those references were averaged. For example, although 227 observations were used for III Corps, they in fact represented 313 actual observations.

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level of combat and the apparent inability of the enemy to replace all the combat losses suffered by the maneuver battalions. Battalion strength levels remained relatively constant during the remainder of 1968 as the intensity of combat abated and the level of the enemy's infiltration about kept pace with his losses.

2. Although the heightened level of combat in South Vietnam in 1968 cost the enemy dearly, these losses alone do not explain the decline in the strengths of his maneuver battalions. During the year the number of maneuver battalions increased from 210 to 289. Thus at year's end the Communists had 38 percent more battalions to flesh out than at the beginning of 1968.\*

I Corps

3. Because of their proximity to North Vietnam, enemy units in I Corps have tended to have much higher average battalion strength levels than elsewhere in South Vietnam. Strengths of well over 500 were quite common prior to 1968 and averaged 460 during the last three months of 1967. The battalion strengths of the enemy forces in I Corps averaged an estimated 390 men in January 1968. Despite their heavy Tet casualties, enemy units were rapidly rebuilt. In their planning for the 1968 Tet offensive, the Communists presumably expected to suffer large losses and had "stored" sizable groups of replacements in areas where they could be moved rapidly to combat units. In March, average battalion strength reached a high for the year of 420 men.

4. Subsequent losses, however, were not replaced completely and the enemy's average maneuver battalion strength level declined, reaching a low of 315 men in October. There was some noticeable impact of the rebuilding process as the average strength rose to 345 in November. The drop to 315 men in December may not be significant, because of the few December samples available for I Corps.

\* During 1968, despite heavy losses, the Communists were able to maintain the aggregate strength of their military forces -- Main and Local combat units and Administrative Services units -- at relatively constant levels. Total losses of about 300,000 were made up by high levels of infiltration and recruitment.

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### II Corps

5. The trend of average maneuver battalion strength in II Corps in 1968 deviated from the countrywide trend, actually moving slightly upward. This general upward movement probably was due in large part to the comparatively lower level of combat in II Corps and to the fact that average battalion strengths there generally had been much lower than elsewhere. During the last quarter of 1967 the strength level in II Corps averaged about 325 men, compared with 460 in I Corps and 370 in III Corps. Only during the last three months of the year was there a pronounced strength decline. Average battalion strength in II Corps during 1968 was about 265 men, but totaled 245 men during the last quarter of the year.

6. As in the other Corps, 1968 strength figures in II Corps reveal a pre-Tet buildup, a sharp drop after Tet, and a subsequent restaffing of combat units. In contrast with the other two Corps, however, average strength remained at a relatively high level with a peak of 300 being reached in July. The downward trend during the last three months of the year differs somewhat from the trend elsewhere and probably is due in part to the nature of the samples available for that period.\*

### III Corps

7. Some of the heaviest casualties suffered by enemy units in 1968 were inflicted on those operating in III Corps. Many units, particularly those deployed around Saigon, were decimated during the periods of heaviest combat. Moreover, constant Allied interdiction and the long distances which NVA replacements had to travel seriously impaired the Communists' ability to maintain adequate force levels in III Corps. Average maneuver battalion

\* The larger share of the sample observations during the last three months of 1968 are of Local Force battalion strengths, which tend to run somewhat lower than those of Main Force units. The increased weight of Local Force battalions results largely from the departure to III Corps of five of II Corps' 10 Main Force regiments during the last few months of 1968.

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strengths totaled 370 during the last quarter of 1967. During 1968 the average strength fell from a high of 325 in January to a low of 240 in September, but increased to 270 by the end of the year. The average for units operating close to Saigon fell even more drastically. The greater average strengths of maneuver battalions in the border areas pulled up the average. The impact on these units of the fluctuations in the level of combat since early 1968 is perhaps best illustrated by the histories of some units in III Corps presented in Appendix B.

The Trend in 1969

8. Hanoi's willingness to accept sizable losses in the early months of 1968 apparently was predicated on the hope of administering a major shock to the United States and achieving a significant military and political victory. By mid-1968, however, prospects for any decisive military victory had faded. Consequently, the enemy became less willing to accept the large losses and retreated into an economy of force tactic designed to reduce casualties substantially. During 1969, there have been various reports of enemy efforts to cut back his combat losses, including a recent reference by Ho Chi Minh to the need to "economize human resources." Although direct ground assaults still are employed against selected targets, the larger share of the enemy's efforts this year has consisted of shellings, sapper attacks, and other guerrilla harassment.

9. A number of recently captured documents and prisoner-of-war reports also indicate that even greater emphasis may be placed on guerrilla-type tactics because of the shrinking size of many combat battalions. There are units with strength levels which prevent them from operating effectively as maneuver battalions but which, with increased firepower, could be used effectively in sapper-type activity.

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These tactics are designed not only to reduce losses but also to inflict casualties and maintain sufficient military pressure in an effort to influence the Paris negotiations.

10. Despite the enemy's efforts to reduce sharply the level of his losses, they still have remained

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high. Total attrition during the first half of 1969 has been estimated at between 160,000 and 175,000. The total of 94,000 enemy troops killed in action was about 80 percent of the number killed during the first half of 1968. The monthly rate for the first half of 1969 was slightly higher than the rate for all of 1968. Moreover, losses have not been balanced by accretions, and aggregate military strength during 1969 must be assumed to have declined.

11. This growing input-loss gap is reflected in a continuing and sharp decline in the enemy's maneuver battalion strength. Based on 57 separate sample observations (largely from III Corps), the estimated strength of these units averaged 265 men in January, 230 men in February, and 240 men in March. Using the methodology described in Appendix A, it is estimated that at the end of March the enemy's maneuver force strength for the country as a whole totaled some 95,000 men, a decline of about 10,000 men from the end of 1968.\* Since there has been no increase in the number of maneuver battalions since late in 1968 (there may even have been a contraction), the declining average strength in 1969 would thus appear to be entirely due to attrition.

**Conclusions**

12. The declining strength of the enemy's maneuver battalions implies that Hanoi must either increase sharply its manpower inputs during the coming months or alter its tactical employment of these units. Despite the use of so-called economy of force tactics, casualties have remained high. Few units have yet reached the point of being ineffective, but the number which can continue to perform the traditional maneuver battalion combat roles is likely to decline. Certainly, many battalions are receiving replacements, but such restaffing appears to be limited.

*\* The end-of-March-1969 figure is derived by multiplying an average battalion strength of 240 men by 289 maneuver battalions and adding divisional and regimental headquarters and support personnel estimated at about 26,000 men. An end-of-1968 figure similarly is obtained by multiplying 265 men by 289 battalions and adding an estimated 28,000 headquarters and support personnel.*

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**SECRET****APPENDIX A****Methodology**

The methodology employed in this memorandum involved examining [redacted] documents and [redacted] reports from which were gleaned several hundred sample observations of maneuver battalion strengths. Those occurring in the same month were averaged together to give a single figure for each month. To arrive at an aggregate strength figure for personnel in maneuver battalions, the monthly average strength figure was then multiplied by the number of maneuver battalions as developed (as of 31 March 1969) by a DIA/CIA working group of the Interagency Intelligence Committee responsible for estimating the North Vietnamese presence in South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. To this total was added an estimated number for divisional and regimental headquarters and support personnel, also derived from sample observations.

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**SECRET****Table 2**

**South Vietnam:  
Strengths of Selected Communist Maneuver Battalions  
During Selected Periods**

	<u>Date</u>	<u>Assigned</u>	<u>Number Present for Duty</u>
3d Battalion, 275th VC Regiment	1 Feb 68	355	
	23 Feb 68	244	177
	29 Mar 68	206	184
	20 May 68	333	297
	25 Feb 69	200	
5th Battalion, 272d VC Regiment	24 Dec 67	345	
	27 Jan 68	324	296
	12 Feb 68	264	182
	12 Nov 68	250	
3d Battalion, 174th NVA Regiment	Nov 67	500	
	Mar 68	320	
	3 Nov 68	286	
3d Battalion, 274th VC Regiment	31 Jul 67	401	362
	27 May 68	338	
	29 Oct 68	288	
	28 Nov 68	345	267
	21 Jan 69	326	
	9 Apr 69	235	
5th Battalion, 165th NVA Regiment	20 Dec 67	500	
	7 May 68	250	
	Aug 68	270	
	10 Nov 68	320	
	28 Feb 69	279	
	18 Mar 69	254	

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